



Voicing Place – an experiential journey

By Lorna Smithers

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Building a relationship with the place where one lives and maintaining its stories is central to Druidic tradition. As an awenydd living in Penwortham, Lancashire, I have been working with the deities and spirits of my locality to learn and share its stories for several years. Here I will describe my experiences and share some of my poems in the hope of inspiring others to give voice to their local places.

Lorna S.

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Greencroft Valley

At Imbolc in 2011 I attended a talk at UCLan Pagan Society by Phil and Lynda Ryder on Druidry. Although I'd considered myself pagan for a while, I had never thought of connecting with the spirits of the places in my immediate locality until I heard their words.

My street, Bank Parade, was built on the bank of Fish House Brook, which is culverted through the back gardens across the road from my house and into Greencroft Valley: a small area of woodland with a green which escaped being built on in the 1970s because it was too steep.

I had been walking through Greencroft Valley at least once or twice a week for many years. Because of its closeness to home in the mundane suburbs I had never stopped to look or listen. When I did, for the first time I saw its beauty. Then I saw the horrendousness of the litter.

Litter in the valley –
when people pass by



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I see their minds are littered with debris;
carrier bags squashed, squeamishly sodden,
crisp packets tattle in the trees.
Chocolate wrappers with dirt in their pockets
chase like dogs without leads.
Discarded, a full can with a wasp in it,
dead, fermented in the void.
Shattered bottles glass the earth,
cider vessels huge and vacuous,
squeezed shut as if by the jaws of some great mutt.
A sip of vinegar slides along the bottom,
seeps out leaving a stench –
stains on the valley,
a land of garbage.

I hauled twenty bags out in a week and contacted the council with the idea of setting up a Friends group. They agreed. Since then we have run regular litter-picks, cleared the brook, set up bird boxes, planted apple trees, and maintain a wildflower meadow.

Over the course of a year I got to know the spirits of Greencroft Valley: the brook and her song; the plants and trees including the wild ivy and the trysting oak; the robins and blackbirds, magpies and wood pigeons, squirrels, butterflies and bees. This process is ongoing.

In 2012 I published my first poetry pamphlet, *The Valley*, giving voice to the valley and its inhabitants. This was printed by South Ribble Borough Council and sold to raise money for plants for our wildflower meadow.

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Belisama: Goddess of the Ribble

Fish House Brook flows into the river Ribble whose tidal stretch lies a mile from my home. When I first started learning about Paganism I experienced a calling to walk the Ribble Way: a 75 mile footpath from Gavel Gap in North Yorkshire to the Dolphin Inn near the Ribble Estuary. As I walked beside the waters on several occasions I heard a song and sensed the presence of what I first identified as a 'nymph' (like so many people only being familiar with the Classical terms for the gods and spirits learnt at school).

I later found out that the Ribble has a goddess called Belisama. Her name is Gallo-Brythonic and means 'Most Mighty One' or 'Most Shining One'. It was a big revelation to me that Britain has its own gods and goddesses whose presence is recorded in Roman inscriptions and texts. Belisama is the name given to the Ribble in Ptolemy's Geography (2AD). It's my belief that 'Ribble' derives from Riga Belisama ('Riga' means Queen).

When I first addressed Belisama by name she appeared to me as a beautiful shining woman with long watery hair. I have seen her since washing her hair in the water and as a being of pure light casting her mantle over the Ribble's watershed. But mostly she communicates through the roar of the water, sunlight dancing on ripples, in the calls of river-birds.

Spending time walking and meditating on the Ribble's banks whilst learning the history of Penwortham on the south bank and the city of Preston opposite on the north bank led me to the realisation Belisama was here before the first people. The settlements were founded because of their proximity to her as a source of nourishing water and food.

I received the gnosis I needed to write Belisama's song. My first effort, a conversation between the sun-god Bel and Belisama, failed. On my second attempt I tried writing the



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history of Preston in Belisama's voice. Once I'd worked out the form: four line stanzas with an ABCB rhyme scheme her words flowed through me like Awen-rich dazzling water.

Proud of Preston

Belisama:

Proud of Preston heed my entry
Hear the voice of ancient memories
Hearts purloined by Roman sentries
Like a river shining bright.

Proud of Preston born free traders
Made by commerce and hard labour
Merchants gilded artists favored
Like the Brigantes warred in tribes.

Mechanics shift the scene of battle
Raise the red brick smog industrial
Cording hearts like twisting material
On the wheels of the cotton lords.

Step the Chartists to the engines
Pull the plugs release the tension
The rioters face the sentries
Dye the river dark with blood.

Grey arise the business faceless
Fake fulfillment for the faithless
Mass the market for the tasteless
Selling life for capital.

High in the stone fortress
The sentries hold their rule



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Beyond the mall and office

Do you hear a river call?

Proud of Preston I have carved you

In my sweeping spirit formed you

Through your veins floods dazzling water

My Setantii shining bright.

Will you hearken to my entry

Drown false dreams in ancient memories

Will the proud of Preston

Like a shining river rise?

‘Proud of Preston’ won the Preston Guild Poetry Competition in 2012. I have since performed it on Preston Flag Market at the Harris Flights event and in other locations in the city.

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Castle Hill

One of my most difficult experiences has been coming to terms with the history of Castle Hill. This is Penwortham’s most sacred site. The Riversway Dockfinds: a collection of animal bones including aurochs, red deer and wild horse; two Bronze Age dug-out canoes; a Bronze Age spearhead; remnants of a timber platform; and 30 humans skulls provide evidence for a Bronze Age lake village on Penwortham Marsh.

Castle Hill is the pen, ‘prominent headland’, that forms the Brythonic root of ‘Penwortham’ (wortham is Anglo-Saxon and means ‘settlement in the bend in the river’). The Norman castle mound and St Mary’s Church on the summit demonstrate its importance as a defensive position and religious centre that was no doubt used for these purposes since the Bronze Age.

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At the foot of Castle Hill is the site of St Mary's Well, which was renowned for its healing and cleansing properties. One can imagine pilgrims praying and washing at the well before climbing the hill to visit St Mary's Church and Penwortham Priory*. It is my personal belief this sacred complex was founded on a pre-Christian site dedicated to a deity of healing waters and marshlands who I have come to know as 'Mary of the Marsh' and 'The Lady of the Marsh'.

St Mary's Well has a tragic story. When the Ribble was moved 500 metres south to her current course beside Castle Hill during the construction of Riversway Dockland in 1884, the sandstone bedrock beneath the hill was broken and the aquifer was shattered causing St Mary's Well to dry up.

This must have been catastrophic for local people who not only viewed St Mary's Well as holy, but relied it on as a clean, pure source of drinking water. Surprisingly very little is written about their response. We do find out that piped water from Preston arrived soon at a cost.

During this research I experienced a vision of 'the spirit of the aquifer' in the form of a water dragon as her womb was breached and her waters unfurled before she vanished to the underworld and recorded it in a poem, which also gives voice to the unspoken lament of the ancestors.

Spirit of the Aquifer

In eighteen eighty four
a monolithic feat of engineering
shifts the Ribble's course:
no water to the springs.



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From the hill's abyssal deep
a rumbling of the bowels,
a vexed aquatic shriek:
no water to the wells.

Breached within the chasm
a dragon lies gasping
with a pain she cannot fathom:
no water to the springs.

Water table reft
her giving womb unswells,
surging through the clefts:
no water to the wells.

Unravelling inside
her serpent magic streams
to join the angry tides:
no water to the springs.

Culverted and banked
her serpent powers fail,
leaking dry and cracked:
no water to the wells.

The spinning dragon-girl
tumbles from her swing
and slips to the underworld:
no water to the springs.

Her spirit will not rise
through the dead and empty tunnels,
disconsolate we cry:
no water to the wells.

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The hill, no longer healing
stands broken of its spell,
no water to the springs,
no water to the wells.

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I've performed this poem to raise awareness about the threat of industrialisation and fracking to our sacred watercourses with Guests of the Earth as part of set called 'Like A Dragon Newly Woken' and on a podcast made by James Lindenschmidt for Gods & Radicals**.

Sadly no words can undo the damage done to Castle Hill. I once wanted to revive its significance as a sacred place for pagans, to hold ceremonies there and invite others to join me. I've since learnt this is not what it wants. It wants to be left alone to heal.

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Fairy Lane

At the foot of Castle Hill runs Fairy Lane. It receives its name from the legend of Penwortham Fairy Funeral. This was originally set on the hill, on Church Avenue, which leads to St Mary's Church and graveyard and significantly was used as a coffin path.

The legend is recorded in James Bowker's *Goblin Tales of Lancashire* (1878) and goes something like this:

Many years ago a young man named Robin and his friend were walking home on a moonlit night. Descending Castle Hill on Church Avenue they arrived at the Lodge and heard the sound of a passing bell and a sorrowful, mournful chant. The gate swung open on its own accord for a procession of little men clad in black wearing red caps carrying a coffin.



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Robin, a curious and impetuous fellow, made the mistake of looking into the coffin. In it he saw his own minute corpse: dew drenched, pale, shrivelled, and wizened. Horrified he followed the fairies to the graveyard. As they lowered the coffin into the grave, Robin attempted to grab the leader of the fairies who was speaking the rites and leading the chant.

The fairies and the coffin vanished. Thunder rolled and lightning flashed. Robin went mad and met his untimely end by falling from a haystack three months afterward.

In later retellings the procession takes place on Fairy Lane. Robin and his friend are drunk on Thwaites's ale and Robin gets away with a scolding from his wife.

This story is suggestive of underlying beliefs in local chthonic spirits. Fairies are often connected with hills and ancient burial sites. It is my suspicion that beneath the Norman castle mound lies not only a Saxon mound, but an ancient burial mound.

It is also common for fairy paths to be identified with coffin paths. There are long-standing traditions of fairies acting as psychopomps: taking people (living and dead) to the Otherworld.

Meditating on this story led me to writing a poem in the voices of the fairies with a rhyme scheme based on the song of the 'dark Forms and Shadows' who 'bear Time to his tomb in Eternity' in Percy Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, with whom I intuited they share a kinship.

Fairy Procession



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I.

Hear, oh, hear

The passing bell, fear

The midnight toll on the corpse road drear.

Heed our chant,

Avert your glance

From the spectral procession of Fairyland.

For fates are we

Who the spirit paths keep

Between this world and mystery.

II.

Year by year

We carry the bier

Down this avenue long and drenched in tears

With a fairy corpse

Whose withered form

And dew-drenched face you would see as your own

Then mad would be,

Insanely flee

From the terror of death to its untimely sleep.

III.

Hear, oh, hear

The passing bell, fear

The midnight toll on the corpse road drear.

Heed our chant,

Avert your glance

From the spectral procession of Fairyland.

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For fates are we

Who the spirit paths keep

Between this world and mystery.

In spite of believing in the fairies and experiencing their presence in brief moments of enchantment, glittering elf-lights, in the crick-crack of branches, I didn't think I'd see their procession. I made an effort to avoid walking drunkenly on Fairy Lane on moonlit nights.

When I did, it wasn't late at night, I wasn't drunk, and the fairies weren't tiny beings wearing black with red caps. I wasn't expecting the fairy leader to be Gwyn ap Nudd, the Brythonic Faery King.

His spectral shine shimmers white as moonlight

His hair floats fair about his phantom limbs

His warrior attire is black as night.

The eyes of the hunter of souls are grim

As the howl of his hounds on Annwn's winds.

Gwyn challenged me to put aside my ambition to be a fantasy writer and journey with him to Annwn, the 'real' Otherworld. Soon afterward I agreed. My old life ended and a new life began in which I dedicated myself to him as my patron god and found my path as an awenydd.

This experience served as proof of the deep mysteries that lie in our small and insignificant legends and forgotten sacred places.

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Martin Mere

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Gwyn ap Nudd, 'White son of Mist', taught me to journey the otherworlds; he took me into the land's memory. In one of these journeys I was riding a mare of mist through a sea of mist across a lake to an island haunted by flickering will-o-wisps. Into my mind came the name 'Martin Mere'.

I'd visited the last remnant of Martin Mere at the WWT reserve in West Lancashire, but didn't know much about its history. I found out that it was once the biggest lake in England. Finds including 15 logboats, a bronze palstave, three spearheads, and parts of two copper crucibles suggest it was occupied in the Bronze Age perhaps with lake villages on its islands.

The drainage of Martin Mere began in 1692 and slowly, dyke by dyke, the land was reclaimed for farming leaving only the last fragment of the lake. The pumps at Crossens remove 373,000 gallons/1700 tons of water per minute. If they shut down, the land would soon re-flood and the lake would return.

The edges of Martin Mere are still recorded in place names such as Mere Sands and Mere Brow. So are its islands: Great Peel, Little Peel, Wet Wholsom, Netholm. The latter was an exciting discovery. Gwyn's patronymic, Nudd, is pronounced 'Neeth'. 'Holm(e)' means island.

Had Gwyn led me to an island where he and his father were venerated? A Romano-British statuette dedicated to Nodens (who later became known as Nudd) was found on Cockerham Moss in Lancashire. I believe it possible Vindos/Gwyn and Nodens/Nudd were worshipped on Netholm.

My researches and insights came together in this prayer:



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Prayer for Netholm

I write this prayer for the White One
who loaned to me a mare of mist,
led me across the marsh of time
and granted me the seer's gift.

I write these words for the god
who led me through the rising mists
to find the lost island of Netholme
midst the floating will-o-wisps.

I write these words from Netholme
looking across the rippling mere
to lights of halls and farmhouses
mixed with ghosts and flickering fear.

I write this prayer for Netholme,
forgotten island in the mist,
for the drained off mere, the bulrushes,
bitterns, cranes and fishermen.

I write this prayer for the souls
of the long forgotten dead
who greet us still in the fields,
wandering roads and haunted farmsteads.

I write these words for the guide
of the long forgotten dead
whose stories must be told
for future hope to live.



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I visit WWT Martin Mere at least once a year. Its wetlands are being restored. It provides a valuable home for local and over-wintering birds who include thousands of Pink-Footed Geese and Whooper Swans. I can only imagine what it might have been like before it was drained.

*

It's my belief that by giving voice to our places, by restorying our landscapes, we resacredise them and awaken in others perceptions of their inspiritedness. This is both a devotional and political task: by serving the gods and spirits we oppose the reductive materialistic capitalist worldview that leads to desecration.

I hope to have given a sense of my own journey into my locality. May the spirits of your landscape guide you in yours.

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*Penwortham Priory was built in 1075 and dissolved in 1535. It was rebuilt as a mansion and finally demolished in the 1920s to make way for housing.

**<https://godsandradsicals.org/2017/02/25/crafted-recordings-podcast-episode-15-like-a-dragon-newly-woken/>